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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Cuban government today withheld visas for a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Freedom (USCIRF), which was planning to meet with religious communities and Cuban government officials to discuss religious freedom on the island.

After weeks of Commission preparations for the trip, including requesting visas and obtaining State Department support for the official visit, making travel arrangements and requesting meetings with Cuban Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Santeria leaders, the Cuban government did not issue the USCIRF delegation visas in time to allow the visit to occur.

The Cuban government gave no explanation, and did not offer alternative dates for a future visit.

"We are very disappointed by the Cuban government's refusal to allow an official U.S. delegation to investigate first-hand Cuban citizens' freedom to believe and practice their faith on the island," said Felice D. Gaer, chair of USCIRF. "Our Commission has visited China, Vietnam, Laos, Saudi Arabia and other countries. Does the Cuban government have something to hide?"

According to published Commission reports, Cuba has been on the USCIRF "Watch List" of countries being monitored for abuse of its citizens' right to freedom of religion or belief since 2004.

Today, the Obama administration announced that it is easing some of the restrictions on travel to the island, and the Cuban officials have made numerous statements about their desire to reestablish good relations with the United States, which has enforced a trade embargo on Cuba for 47 years. It is also reported that the Castro government is demanding no preconditions in return for opening discussions on easing restrictions.

"The Commission has received reports that there are improvements in some sectors in Cuba. As with other countries, we seek to ascertain how much and where. If everything is so normal in Cuba, then the Cuban government should welcome a USCIRF visit. Not allowing USCIRF's bipartisan delegation to visit is a very disturbing sign," said Gaer.

USCIRF Commissioners said they would continue to make visa applications to visit Cuba, in order to evaluate the state of religious freedom on the island.

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